

E-MAIL ANSWERING AGENT

5

ABSTRACT

10 The present invention is answering agent accessible at an e-mail destination address. The answering agent waits for e-mail messages to be delivered that have a "To:" header and a "Subject:" header. The "To:" header is filled-in by a user and has two halves, a topic half and a domain name half in the form of "topic@domain-name". The answering agent logically resides at the corresponding domain-name address on a network, e.g., the Internet. It extracts the source addresses of e-mail messages it receives so that it knows where to return answers and where a database of preferences might be indexed locally. The topic refers to an area of information that the user has a question about. The "Subject:" header is filled-in by the user with a qualifier that helps narrow down the breadth of the user's inquiry. A finite set of topical areas are accessible to the user through the answering agent. A database and the Internet itself are data-mined for current information and the locations of information that could be used to answer users' questions. The answering agent, in effect, converts e-mail format queries for information into standard browser websearches and collects the answers to the questions. The questions can be anticipated and the answers placed in a cache, or the questions can be researched automatically in real-time.